DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 824 HE 005 418

TITLE	Higher Education in the 1970s.
INSTITUTION	London Univ. (England). Inst. of Education.
PUB DATE	Jan 71
NOTE	11p.; For related document, see HE 005 419
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	*Admission (School); *Educational Finance; Educational Objectives; Educational Policy; Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; *Program Length; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the statement by the Higher Education Policy Group concerning the functions, content, and pattern of higher education in Britain. Part 1 reviews courses with emphasis on entry to higher education and the content, arrangement, and length of courses. Part 2 discusses organization with emphasis on the coordination of higher education, machinery for admission degree-giving powers for nonuniversity institutions, the polytechnics and certain other local authority colleges, the education and training of teachers, and the control of standards and the supply of teachers. Part 3 reviews finance. Emphasis is placed on the dilemma of numbers and costs, rates of growth, teaching costs, and student contributions. (MJM)

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 1970s

A statement by the
HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY GROUP
January 1971

INTRODUCTION

1. The views put forward in this statement represent the general consensus of the group whose members are listed below. The group has come together with the object of considering the functions, content and pattern of higher education* in Britain. It first met at a two-day conference in July 1969, and has met many times since. Each member has taken part in the discussions in a personal and non-representative capacity.

2. We have met at a time of national dilemma. On current projections, the number of students wishing and qualified to enter higher education in the next decade will rise at the rate of five to six per cent per annum, in sharp contrast with a likely growth in gross national product of about three per cent per annum. It seemed only realistic to accept as a first premise that the costs of higher education will have to rise more slowly than the number of qualified entrants: we have therefore, with regret, been particularly concerned to explore ways of achieving desired educational goals within strict financial constraints.

3. There are no obvious answers to the questions we have considered. Nor have we been able to pursue many of them, and particularly those related directly to administration and to costs, to their final conclusions. We have simply attempted to indicate the directions of change we would favour and those we would not.

4. To have set complete unanimity as our goal would have resulted in the omission of some important proposals which many, but not all, of us favour. Our aim has been, instead, to publish a statement at what seemed a timely juncture, with the very clear reservation that no one member should be assumed to endorse every paragraph in it.

PART 1 - COURSES

Entry to higher education

5. If among young people with each type of school-leaving qualification the proportion entering full-time higher education remains constant, the number of entrants is likely to rise by over two-thirds within ten years. Despite this we hold strongly that entry opportunities should not be diminished. We propose changes by which these opportunities can be maintained without a pro rata increase in the number of places.

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* As defined by the Robbins Report: university courses, courses for the education and training of teachers, and courses of further education beyond A Level or beyond O.N.C. or its equivalent.

6. The entry requirements for degree courses should remain at approximately the present levels. This should not be taken to imply any judgement about the future of A Level examinations or of the present pattern of specialised sixth form courses. Nor should it imply that different entry qualifications will not be appropriate for some students in some degree courses. In particular, full recognition should be given to the experience, and the qualifications, of those who have been in employment and part-time education since leaving school. It should be noted that, if entry requirements remain as they now are, the qualifications of the student population seen as a whole are likely to improve. By 1980, nearly 25 per cent of school leavers will have obtained the equivalent of two or more A Levels; the proportion holding one A Level will also have risen sharply; and the proportion holding no A Level will fall.

7. We do not, however, think that higher education should become in any sense obligatory - and accordingly, all who stay on in full-time education between the ages of 16 and 18 will need an effective system of guidance. Some who will be qualified to enter will not want to do so. Others may choose an initial period of employment with opportunities for concurrent part-time study (such as many institutions already offer), provided they are assured of the right to transfer to full-time higher education later. An increasing number of institutions should be willing to offer places in a subsequent year to such applicants, and the entry machinery should be adapted to take this into account; those offered deferred places should be helped to find relevant employment during the intervening period by university appointments boards and those concerned with work placement in other institutions.

The content, arrangement and length of courses

8. In a period of rapid development, it is not possible accurately to predict how many professionally qualified people will be needed, or indeed what new professions will need them. Already a proportion of students graduating do not enter the profession most closely related to their studies, or do not stay in that profession throughout their working lives. It would seem therefore that if a smaller proportion of students followed narrowly academic honours courses, or courses qualifying them for highly specific professions, the country would gain by the change. This might also accord better with the wishes of students, a growing proportion of whom have entry qualifications ranging across the traditional division between arts and sciences.

9. There are at present men and women in higher education courses they do not particularly want to take. Several different factors determine an applicant's entry choices, and it can hardly be expected that all applicants fully understand what is involved in the selections they make: yet acceptance is normally related to a particular course. In our view, the emphasis should be on entry to the institution, and the choice of course should be confirmed only after the student has entered. Students whose aims and interests subsequently change, or who find that their abilities do not match the course on which they have embarked, should be readily able to transfer to another course in the same institution or another, with credit for the work they have done. At the same time, we would hope to see a wider range of choice, with more courses bringing together a number of subjects to form a coherent whole (and fewer which constitute a collection of unrelated segments of knowledge). If these changes were made we would expect that the overall proportion of students following specialised academic or vocational courses would be reduced.

10. A degree with honours should be awarded only on completion of three years of full-time study or its part-time equivalent; and every student should (as at present) have the right, if he successfully completes his first and second years at the minimum standard now required, to continue for a third. Entrants to degree courses should, however, not be faced with three years of full-time education or none. For some, alternation between full-time and part-time study may be appropriate. Others may find a full-time course of two years' duration to be adequate for their immediate needs, and it should be permissible for students at their own choice to leave after two years taking with them a degree recognising their attainment if a suitable standard has been reached. But this degree - and we attach considerable importance to its being a degree rather than a diploma - should also entitle them to return later for a third full-time year at some institution of higher education with a resumption of grant, credit being given for any relevant work experience, and the possibility of completing an honours degree remaining open.

11. A higher proportion of students than at present should go directly into employment when they graduate, but more should return later for postgraduate or post-experience education as and when the need arises.

12. Although we have suggested that relatively fewer students might follow specialised courses, we do not wish to imply that professional qualifications will be less important than hitherto. On the contrary, they are likely to grow in range and complexity. But if professional training is to be relevant, the student must be enabled to pursue the right professional course at the right stage of his educational and working career. For some, professional training will best form part of a sandwich first degree course. For others, it may mean combining a two-year degree course with an immediately following professional course, supplemented by a year or more of training while in employment (in-service training) before a professional qualification is awarded. Others again will wish to acquire such a qualification after a longer period of work experience. There is scope for considerable variety here, and we hope that the professional bodies will respond to changing educational, social and professional needs by modifying their requirements for professional qualifications.

13. If students are to match their needs, wishes and attainments to the much more flexible and varied arrangements we favour, they will clearly need special guidance not only before entering higher education but also at its various subsequent turning-points.

PART 2 - ORGANISATION

Coordination of Higher Education

14. The higher education system will continue to combine a considerable diversity of institutions with much overlapping of aims and functions between them: but existing administrative differences should not distort their underlying community of purpose. There can be no justification for different levels of basic provision between different types of institution. Setting aside for this comparison the varying (but very important) element attributable to research and other relevant outside activities, the total cost of teaching a first degree student on a given type of course in a given subject field should be broadly similar throughout higher education.

15. Whatever their differences in financial and administrative arrangements, neighbouring institutions of higher education must in the future be functionally related to each other. Expensive academic equipment, including specialist library collections, should be shared; buildings equipped for teaching should be put to maximum use and waste of scarce staffing resources avoided wherever possible. There are also obvious educational and financial advantages in providing social facilities for use jointly by students in all institutions for whom they would be easily accessible. A reasonable balance must be struck between the desirability of having facilities readily available and the equal desirability of using them to the fullest possible extent. Immediate efforts to overcome the obstacles to cooperation must depend on voluntary initiative, pending the emergence of an appropriate structure to ensure effective joint planning in the long term. If institutions of higher education fail to take active steps to achieve closer coordination, they are likely to have a less acceptable form of rationalisation imposed upon them.

Machinery for admissions

16. Our recommendations for cooperation between different types of institution, and the ease of transfer of students from one to another, would point towards a unified admissions system for all higher education. It would have to be so designed that the process of entry to higher education was simplified rather than further complicated: this may be impracticable at present. To coordinate entry to the whole range of full-time courses at degree and sub-degree level in all institutions of higher education would be an enormous undertaking: the complexity of such a system might well deter applications from less confident students. But the first steps towards rationalisation would be for the polytechnics and other colleges of further education offering comparable courses to agree to a single common application form for all such courses, and for the separate admission arrangements for universities and colleges of education to be merged.

17. Any transfer of students during a first degree course between different institutions is currently arranged on the personal initiative of the teachers concerned. If the number of transfers grows, as we think possible, appropriate central clearing house arrangements may need to be considered.

18. Information about postgraduate courses in all institutions offering higher degrees should, as a matter of urgency, be brought together in a regular publication. Some more systematic and coordinated admissions machinery for postgraduate courses in all institutions will also be needed as numbers grow.

Degree-giving powers for non-university institutions

19. The chartering of the Royal College of Art and Cranfield has established precedents for institutions other than universities to award their own degrees. The opportunity to apply for degree-giving powers should be given to polytechnics and to the larger colleges of education when they reach an appropriate stage of growth and academic development. In moving towards this it may be necessary for some institutions to appoint academic advisory committees (as was done in the case of the former Colleges of Advanced Technology during their transition to university status).

20. The polytechnics and other colleges conducting degree courses under the Council

for National Academic Awards are at widely varying stages of development: it would therefore be difficult for the Council to apply the same procedure to all of them now. However, as each institution grows in experience and excellence the Council might cease to be concerned primarily with the approval of individual courses, developing instead means of evaluating the institution as a whole on the basis of its current work and its future plans. This state of affairs would be easier to bring about if polytechnics and colleges were able to plan their programmes on a time scale substantially longer than the present period of one year or so.

The polytechnics and certain other local authority colleges

21. The emergence of the polytechnics has focused attention on the provision of advanced further education by the local authorities. While the polytechnics draw students for their wide range of part-time courses mainly from local communities, in their other work they are increasingly performing a national role. Some local representation in the control of expenditure must be accepted as a corollary to their local ties, but the development of these and other degree-giving institutions will depend on their being seen to have autonomy and responsibility for their own academic development.

22. There is therefore a need for new machinery to reconcile the requirements of continuity in academic planning with the ultimate responsibilities of local education authorities. Present arrangements for revenue expenditure make it difficult to permit forward budgeting for recurrent costs on more than a year-to-year basis, although the interest in new techniques of financial management now being shown by a number of authorities is likely to promote more effective long-term planning.

23. In securing approval for capital expenditure on higher education, local education authorities should be willing to create new arrangements at national level, where they would act in partnership with other interests. We would favour the establishment of a central body to replace the existing practice of direct negotiation by individual authorities with the Department of Education and Science. Such a body would act after taking appropriate academic advice from those working in the polytechnics and other colleges. To ensure that its powers were more than merely advisory, the Department of Education and Science might with advantage limit its own decisions to determining the overall capital expenditure on the public sector of higher education, leaving the new body to allocate projects within the total budget. The work of this central body would be made easier if capital for advanced further education were in a separate building programme, as is already the case for capital expenditure on colleges of education.

The education and training of teachers

24. We believe that in the long term few of the colleges of education should remain as highly specialised institutions, although many which, in one way or another, develop more general functions are likely to retain a special interest in both the initial and the further education of teachers. Their activities in the field of in-service training should be encouraged and extended.

25. The options for the colleges should include the following, and individual colleges

should begin to consider which of them are most appropriate to their own needs and circumstances:

(i) Some of the larger colleges might develop into chartered degree-giving institutions in their own right. Their scope might be widened to include courses in the liberal arts and sciences, as well as courses with a professional orientation towards the whole range of the social services. They could usefully cater both for degree and lower level work.

(ii) A number of colleges might become federated or integrated with universities; others might similarly become parts of polytechnics.

(iii) Still other colleges might concentrate on in-service training for a variety of professions, and thus have functions within both the higher education and the further education systems. Their activities might well include advanced professional training for teachers and social workers, adult education, and work in conjunction with the Open University.

Control of standards and the supply of teachers

26. The central role of the Institutes of Education in the provision, content and coordination of the initial and further education of teachers should be clarified, and their regional distribution re-examined in the light of the recent growth in the number of universities and the emergence of the polytechnics.

27. Courses specially designed for the education and training of teachers should continue to be of not less than three years' duration, and should allow scope for variation in the arrangement of the training element as between concurrent and end-on courses. Professional training for all those taking courses with an education component should in addition require at least one, and preferably two, years of continuing tuition while teaching before the award of a full professional qualification is finally made. Such work should be supervised by teachers in schools as well as by those responsible for teacher education in the universities, polytechnics and colleges. Graduates with either two- or three-year degrees whose courses have included no education component should take a postgraduate course in the theory and practice of education, which should similarly be followed by a year or more of practical experience allied with continuing tuition.

28. The freeing of some of the colleges of education to pursue other goals in addition to the education of teachers, and the amalgamation of a number of colleges with universities or polytechnics, would raise nationally the question of a guaranteed supply of teachers and the means of controlling it. The recent falling off in applications for entrance to the colleges, the wastage rate during the certificate course, and the very high wastage during the early years of teaching, have shown the relative weakness of the present system of control. But because total entries into higher education will be increasing so rapidly, the overall total of teachers can be expected to rise, even if the proportion of students who enter teaching is lower. It therefore seems likely that little will be lost by allowing recruitment to the teaching profession to be influenced to a greater extent than at present by market forces. If control were needed it could be exercised through salary scales and through the special provision of places for the

professional training of teachers, in much the same way as the government at present exercises control on the numbers entering the medical, dental or veterinary professions.

PART 3 - FINANCE

The dilemma of numbers and costs

29. On present projections of growth in the number of students, assuming constant staff/student ratios and no change in the proportion of costs borne by students, public expenditure on full-time higher education would grow from about £550m in 1970/1 to about £1,150m in 1981/2 - or from 1.4% of the gross national product to about 2.1%. Such a rise could be financed either through an increase in the total share of the GNP devoted to public expenditure, to which both major political parties are opposed, or through a switch of expenditure to higher education from other public services. We believe strongly that if expansion is to proceed at an acceptable rate and that if the necessary standards are to be maintained there will have to be some increase in the share of GNP going to higher education. But we have reluctantly concluded that an increase of the magnitude indicated seems out of the question and something will have to be done to ensure that costs rise more slowly than this. Three main approaches are open, given that cost economies should be chosen so that they will do as little damage as possible.

Rates of growth

30. The first is to limit the rate of growth of student numbers, either by cutting the number of entrants or by reducing the effective length of course. We regard a restriction of the opportunity for entry to higher education as the least desirable of all approaches - it should not be contemplated unless all other steps fail. But we have advocated that students should be able to leave with a degree after two years of full-time study if they wish to do so: this provision is likely somewhat to reduce the average period of study and so bring about certain savings. For example, a 10 to 15% reduction in the proportion of students returning for a third full-time year, could save some £35 to £50m in 1981. There should also be some reduction in the proportion of new graduates going on to postgraduate work: but against this we favour more post-graduate education for people with work experience, so the net savings here will be limited.

Teaching costs

31. The second approach is to reduce the real cost per student. We believe this is feasible without loss of quality. Reduced unit costs may be expected to follow from the concentration of growth in existing institutions and departments. The evidence shows that in larger departments the average cost of providing a given quality of service is less. Moreover, developments in educational technology and resource management may within the next decade make it possible to reduce the amount of duplication which results from each institution doing everything for itself. Some reduction in the staff/student ratio would also not seem unreasonable: but any sudden or drastic change would be disastrous and we should oppose it. An average reduction

of, say, 15% in higher education as a whole should be tolerable over a ten-year period of expansion, but it should be carefully planned so that poorly-staffed departments and institutions do not suffer, and so that staff numbers continue to grow at a reasonable rate during the ten-year period of expansion ahead. This would save £60m in 1981.

Student contributions

32. Finally, there is the question of the students' share in the cost. The taxpayers now provide each student during a three-year course with services and maintenance worth on average some £4,000. The potential entrant to higher education would in any case have a higher lifetime income than the average wage-earner. To this a student's education adds a further source of earning power: while it makes him more socially productive, he himself receives a large share of the resulting increase in the social product. Of course, in so far as education raises income, graduates already pay more tax than they would if they had not received higher education: but the value of this extra tax is small compared with the public subsidy they have received. So the overall process is a significant source of income inequality, transferring wealth from the poorer to the richer. The case for a higher student contribution is therefore grounded in equity.

33. Some may object to any arrangement which, by reducing the effect of the parental means test, can be seen as affecting the poor student more than the rich one. But every such attempt to be fair, as between those who have received higher education and those who have not, will be called unfair, as between one student from a wealthy family willing to contribute to his higher education and another whose parents are less well off or less willing so to contribute. No repayment scheme devised to fit into the present grant pattern can hope to avoid this criticism.

34. We are in principle opposed to any financial arrangements which by requiring payments from students, even if deferred, would act as a deterrent to entry into higher education and therefore would ideally wish to see students in receipt of grants rather than loans. However, higher education already consumes a fraction of the total education budget which some would regard as excessive and expansion of higher education on the scale we hope to see would greatly strengthen these criticisms. The choice may therefore be between on the one hand continuation of the present grant system, with a less than desirable number entering higher education, and on the other some contribution from each student but more entrants to higher education. We therefore consider it prudent to suggest for discussion a student partial loan scheme which at least has the important merit of avoiding the perpetual and distressing troubles which arise from non-payment of the parental contribution. One possible arrangement, indicating the comparatively small burden of repayment needed to effect sizable economies, is illustrated in the Appendix.

CONCLUSION

35. Despite the emphasis we have had to place on the financial problems facing higher education, we have also suggested ways in which the system as a whole could be

re-oriented better to meet the requirements of the students themselves, of the society of which they form a part, and of the national economy to which they may be expected to contribute. We have tried to reconcile the demand for more systematic overall planning with the need for a more open and autonomous structure. As for the costs of higher education, we can only reiterate that some choice of methods to reduce them is inevitable. The savings we have proposed are small compared with the probable increases in expenditure: it is open to those who disagree with them, or with our suggestions for new educational goals or new organisational arrangements, to suggest better alternatives.

Appendix: A scheme for conditional grants

An illustrative income-related scheme for graduate contributions might be as follows.

Outright maintenance grants would continue at their present level, thus preserving some differential support to students from poorer homes. But in the meantime the real value of the grant would be eroded by inflation and the growth of parental income, and some students would need a new source of finance. This would be provided in the form of conditional grants. For each further £100 of grant a student took out, he would pay back a prearranged precentage of his income via the Inland Revenue until he had repaid the £100 plus the appropriate interest. For the scheme to be self-balancing at a real rate of interest of five per cent per annum, with repayment spread on average over twenty years, about one-third of one per cent of the graduate's total income would need to be repaid each year. In other words, a conditional grant of £300 would result in the alienation of only 1% of future annual income over twenty years. The relief to public funds would soon build up to a substantial level: if after 1971 the average sum accepted by every student were £100 a year, the repayment would be about £30m in 1981 and over £100m in 1991.

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Others whose help in its discussions the Group gratefully acknowledges include:-

Sir William Armstrong
Professor Asa Briggs
Mr. Geoffrey Caston
Mr. Dudley Fiske
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Sir Peter Venables
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The Group appreciates the financial help it has received from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Mr. Stanley Burton, Tube Investments Ltd. and International Computers Ltd.

The Group owes a great debt to its Secretariat: Miss Bettie Knott, formerly of the Robbins Committee Secretariat, Mr. R. A. Becher, Assistant Director of the Nuffield Foundation, and Miss Susan Rawlings, personal secretary to Professor Niblett.